

Don't let go

"I just wanna leave this place behind.

Every time I see your face in mine."

Est

The Morning After

I woke up on the couch in Tui's apartment. For a moment, I didn't remember. The ceiling looked familiar, the blanket smelled like laundry detergent, and there was that particular quality of afternoon light that meant I'd slept far later than I should have.

Then the memories hit.

The bar. The drinks. The bathroom calls. William's door. The kiss that tasted like desperation. The vomiting—oh god, the vomiting—between our feet, on the sidewalk, everywhere.

I put my hands over my face and groaned.

God, how embarrassing.

Tui must be so disappointed. After everything he'd done—the sleepover, the bar night, the office visit, the constant support—I'd repaid him by getting blackout drunk, stalking my ex, could I even call William an ex?, and making him drag me home at 3 AM.

Again.

I sat up slowly.

My body ached in ways I didn't know bodies could ache. My head was pounding—a deep, rhythmic throb that felt like someone was playing drums inside my skull. My mouth tasted like death.

But on the coffee table, arranged with careful precision, was evidence that Tui was still taking care of me. A bottle of water, still cold. A muffin—chocolate chip, my favorite. A painkiller and some stomach pills, set neatly beside the food.

The apartment was spotless. Tui must have cleaned while I slept, and I hadn't even woken up. Either he was incredibly quiet or I'd been so deeply unconscious that a marching band couldn't have roused me.

Probably the latter.

I ate the muffin slowly, forcing myself to chew even though my stomach was

uncertain about the whole concept of food. The water helped—cold and clean, washing away some of the sourness in my throat.

My phone sat on the table in front of me. I didn't touch it. Just thinking about last night—the calls, the voicemails, the things I'd said—made my headache worse. Twenty-three calls. Four voicemails. All that raw, desperate emotion, recorded and preserved for William to hear whenever he bothered to check.

If he ever does.

I took the pills. Finished the water. Sat there for a long moment, gathering the courage to move.

Tidying up felt like penance. I folded the blankets, straightened the cushions, stripped the sheets from the couch and put them in the wash. Small tasks, manageable tasks, things I could do without thinking too hard.

A towel and clean clothes were waiting on Tui's bed. Gray tracksuit, soft and worn. A white t-shirt that was probably his but fit me well enough. His sandals by the door.

The shower was a revelation.

Hot water pounding against my skin, washing away the stale alcohol sweat and the memory of vomiting on expensive carpet. Tui's soap smelled like sandalwood and something citrusy—familiar, comforting. Scrubbing until my skin felt raw, trying to wash away the feeling of William's carpet under my knees.

I emerged feeling almost human.

When I finally dared to look at my phone, it was 1 PM.

The screen was full of notifications I didn't want to read. Missed calls, not from William—never from William. Text messages. Social media alerts that seemed utterly irrelevant to the disaster my life had become.

I put my clothes—the white t-shirt, the denim jacket, everything from last night—into a paper bag. Evidence of my breakdown, neatly packaged for disposal.

Then I went downstairs to face the music.

The studio was quiet. Soft music played from somewhere—one of Tui's curated playlists, probably. The "Occupied" sign hung on the door to the private room, which meant Yuki was with a client. Normal. Routine. The world continuing to turn even when mine had stopped. Tui was in the main room, seated in front of his computer. His posture was relaxed, but I could see the tension in his shoulders. He'd been waiting for me.

Hong was there too. He sat in a wheeled chair, rolling slowly across the floor in a

way that seemed almost playful. His silver hair caught the light as he looked at his phone, his expression characteristically unreadable.

When I appeared in the doorway, they both looked up.

I braced myself.

For pity. For anger. For the shouting I probably deserved after acting like a hurt teenager with no impulse control.

Instead, I found worried eyes.

Tui's expression was soft, concerned. Not the disappointment I'd expected, just... worry. The look of someone who cared about you and was scared of how close you'd come to the edge.

And Hong—

Hong surprised me. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice quiet but urgent. "Did that boy William do anything to you?"

The question caught me off guard. Hong barely knew me—we'd met a handful of times, exchanged maybe a dozen sentences total. But his concern was genuine, visible in the way he leaned forward, in the way his eyes searched my face.

He's worried about me.

I opened my mouth to answer, but Tui spoke first.

"Lego called me last night." His voice was careful, measured. "To tell me you were at William's apartment. That's how I knew to come get you."

Something shifted in Hong's expression. His hands, which had been resting loosely on his thighs, gripped the leather of the wheeled stool. His playful movement stopped entirely.

"Lego." he whispered. The name came out strange—almost tender, but with an edge of something else. Annoyance, maybe. Or concern of a different kind.

I watched his face change as he processed the information. The implications. The fact that Lego—sweet, cheerful, flower-shop Lego—was somehow connected to all of this. That Lego knew where I'd been, what I'd done, probably knew all the sordid details of my breakdown.

And suddenly, I saw it clearly.

Almost everything I'd said about William—to Tui, to anyone who would listen—had been complaints. The silence. The mixed signals. The way he let me in and then shut me out. The kiss, the painting, the promises that evaporated into nothing.

William was always the villain in my stories. And now Lego—William's best friend, William's childhood companion, the person who brought him flowers every Wednesday—was caught in the middle.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I didn't mean to drag everyone into this."

Hong looked at me for a long moment. His expression was unreadable again, that careful mask back in place. "You didn't drag anyone," he said finally. "But Lego..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Lego worries about everyone. Even when he shouldn't have to."

He worries about William too, I realized. And now he's worrying about me. And probably worried about Hong worrying. The web of connections was dizzying. Everyone caring about everyone, trying to hold each other up while their own foundations crumbled.

I sat down on the sofa, suddenly exhausted all over again.

"I messed up," I said. "Last night. I really, really messed up."

Tui nodded slowly. "Yeah. You did."

"I called him like twenty times. Left voicemails. Showed up at his building. Kissed him in the doorway and then vomited on his feet." Hong's eyebrows rose slightly—the most dramatic reaction I'd ever seen from him.

"I'm a disaster," I continued. "I know that. I just... I couldn't stop. I needed answers. I needed to understand why—"

"Why he pushed you away." Tui finished.

"Yeah."

Silence settled over the studio. The soft music continued to play. Somewhere in the back room, I could hear the faint buzz of Yuki's machine.

"Did you get your answers?" Hong asked quietly.

I thought about William's face in the doorway. The shock. The way he'd kissed me back, briefly, before everything fell apart.

"No." I admitted. "I got more questions."

Tui sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"I'm fine," I said to Hong, though the words felt flimsy. Paper-thin. The kind of lie you tell when you're too tired to construct a convincing one. "William didn't... he didn't hurt me physically. I was just... a mess."

Hong didn't look convinced. "You looked like a ghost yesterday," he said flatly. "And now you look like a corpse."

"Thanks, Hong."

"I'm serious." He stood up, abandoning the wheeled stool with a sudden restlessness that seemed at odds with his usual composed demeanor. His silver hair caught the light as he moved, and I noticed for the first time that he looked tired too—dark smudges under his eyes, a tension in his jaw.

"That guy is trouble." Hong continued, his voice gaining an edge. "Every time his name comes up, someone ends up crying or bleeding or throwing up." I flinched.

He wasn't wrong.

"Hong," Tui warned gently.

"What? It's true." Hong crossed his arms, his posture defensive. "First Lego comes here looking like he's been through a war, now Est. William Jakrapatr needs to stay in his tower and leave everyone else alone."

I stared at him.

"Lego came here?"

The question hung in the air. Hong's expression shifted—a flicker of guilt crossing his features, the realization that he'd said something he shouldn't have.

The pieces clicked into place. Lego. William's best friend. The one who brought flowers every Wednesday, who'd known him since they were children, who'd spent his adolescence in William's home cooking with his mother.

Looking like he's been through a war.

Something had happened. Something beyond just me and my breakdown. Tui was looking at Hong now, his expression shifting from concern to something sharper. Worried. Clearly learning this information at the same time I was.

But he said nothing. And I had no right to ask more questions. Not about this. Not about Lego, who I barely knew, who I'd once sat in silence and watched as William dismissed him. Of all of us, Hong was the one who knew Lego best—the one who'd been spending time with him, who'd been sending selfies and checking in.

If Lego had come here looking wounded, Hong would know why.

And it wasn't my story to demand.

"Is he okay?" I asked instead.

The guilt twisted in my gut alongside the nausea. I'd been so consumed by my own pain that I'd never stopped to think about Lego. About what it meant for him to be caught between his best friend's breakdown and whatever storm I'd brought crashing into their lives.

"He's coping," Hong said shortly. "Which is more than I can say for you right now."

"Hey," Tui said, sharper this time. "Be nice."

"I am being nice." Hong's jaw tightened. "I'm telling the truth."

He looked at me, and for just a moment, his gaze softened. Not pity, exactly. More like recognition—one person who understood pain looking at another.

"You need to stay away from him, Est," Hong said quietly. "Whatever you think is there... it's not worth this."

I looked down at my hands.

At the paper bag beside me, holding my ruined clothes. At the borrowed tracksuit that smelled like Tui's laundry detergent. At all the evidence of how far I'd fallen.

"I know." I whispered.

The room fell silent.

The soft music continued to play—something ambient, unobtrusive. From the back room, I could hear the distant hum of Yuki's tattoo machine, the sound of normal work happening while I sat here like a disaster zone.

I leaned back against the sofa cushions and felt the weight of their concern pressing down on me. Tui's steady presence, reliable as always. Hong's fierce protectiveness, surprising but genuine. They cared about me.

I wasn't sure I deserved it.

Do I attract this kind of thing?

The question surfaced unbidden, ugly and familiar.

My first boyfriend—the one from high school, the one who'd made me realize what I was—had never spoken to me again after my parents kicked me out. No goodbye. No explanation. Just silence, as if I'd stopped existing the moment I became inconvenient.

The people I'd dated during college had been a parade of disasters. The guy who wanted me until he didn't. The one who said he loved me and then disappeared. The ones who were emotionally unavailable, or secretly still hung up on exes, or just looking for someone to fill a space until something better came along.

And now William. Beautiful, broken William, who'd let me in just far enough to make it hurt when he slammed the door.

There has to be something wrong with me.

The thought was poison, but I couldn't stop drinking it.

Why else would this keep happening?

"Est."

Tui's voice pulled me back. I looked up to find him watching me, his expression patient.

"You're spiraling," he said. "I can see it on your face."

"I'm not—"

"You are." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "You're sitting there thinking about every relationship that's ever gone wrong, trying to figure out what you did to deserve it."

I opened my mouth to deny it. Closed it again. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've known you for years. Because I've watched you do this every single time." His voice was gentle, but firm. "And because I used to do the same thing."

Hong had gone quiet, watching us with that observant gaze of his. I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"The pattern isn't you," Tui continued. "It's what you're choosing. Or what you think you deserve."

"That's basically the same thing."

"It's really not." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Est, you're a good person. You're talented and kind and you care too much about everyone. But somewhere along the way, you decided that love was supposed to hurt. That if it wasn't difficult, it wasn't real."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him he was wrong, that I didn't seek out pain, that I just had bad luck.

But the words wouldn't come.

Because maybe he was right.

"William was always going to be a disaster," Tui said quietly. "You knew that going in. Everyone knew it. A recluse who hasn't left his apartment in three years, who

has panic attacks and pushes people away—that's not a project, Est. That's a person who needs to do their own work."

"I thought I could help him."

"I know you did." Tui's smile was sad. "That's the problem. You think love is about saving people. But you can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved. And you definitely can't save them if you're drowning too."

Hong shifted in his peripheral vision, and I remembered what he'd said about Lego.

Looking like he's been through a war.

Lego, who'd been trying to save William for years. Who brought flowers every Wednesday, who kept showing up even when William didn't answer. Who'd probably been drowning this whole time while pretending to be sunshine and smiles.

What if the one who is your light turns out to be as lost in the darkness as you?

The thought hit me like a physical blow.

"What do I do?" I asked, and my voice came out smaller than I intended.

"You rest," Tui said. "You eat. You drink water. You stop calling William. And when you're ready—when you're actually ready, not just desperate for answers—we'll talk about what comes next."

"That sounds terrifying."

"It should." Tui smiled slightly. "Growth usually is."

Hong spoke up, his voice softer now. "You should talk to someone. Professionally, I mean. About the patterns. The things you keep choosing."

I looked at him. "Is that your professional opinion?"

"It's my personal one." He shrugged. "My parents are therapists. I grew up surrounded by this stuff. And trust me—everyone needs someone objective to talk to. Especially when your friends are too close to see you clearly."

I thought about Nut's suggestion at the office. Company therapist. Strongly suggest you use it. Maybe it wasn't such a terrible idea.

The conversation faded into something gentler after that. Tui made tea. Hong eventually returned to his stool, scrolling through his phone with less energy than before. The music continued to play, and Yuki's machine hummed from the back room. I sat on the sofa, wrapped in borrowed clothes, and tried to imagine a version of myself that didn't do this. That didn't fall for storms. That chose steady over chaos, calm over intensity.



It felt impossible.

But maybe that was okay.

Maybe impossible things were just things that took longer.

My phone buzzed.

I almost ignored it—still not ready to face the wreckage of last night—but something made me look.

A text from an unknown number.

"This is William's manager. Mr. Jakrapatr wanted me to inform you that he has received your messages and will not be responding. Please do not contact him again. Any further communication should go through this office. Thank you for your understanding."

I stared at the screen.

Then I laughed. It was a broken, hollow sound that made both Tui and Hong look up in alarm.

"What is it?" Tui asked.

I held up the phone so they could see.

"He sent his manager," I said. "He couldn't even reject me himself. He sent his manager."

Tui's expression tightened.

Hong just shook his head. "Stay away from him." Hong repeated quietly. "I mean it, Est. For your own sake."

I looked at the message one more time.

Then I deleted it.

After a while, I decided to go outside.

"I need fresh air." I said, pushing myself up from the sofa with more effort than the simple motion should have required. My body still ached from the night before—the drinking, the crying, the vomiting, the emotional wreckage that had left bruises I couldn't see but definitely felt.

Neither Tui nor Hong tried to stop me. Maybe they understood that I needed a moment alone, away from their concerned gazes and careful words. Maybe they

were just tired of watching me fall apart in real-time, like some kind of slow-motion disaster they couldn't look away from.

Either way, they let me go.

The studio door chimed as I pushed through it, and suddenly I was outside, surrounded by the chaos of a Bangkok afternoon.

The street was busy with afternoon traffic.

Cars honked in the distance, their drivers impatient in the way that city drivers always seemed to be—somewhere important to go, someone important to see, no time to waste on courtesy or patience. Motorbikes weaved between lanes with that particular recklessness that I'd grown used to over the years, their riders seemingly unbothered by the laws of physics or self-preservation.

The air smelled like exhaust and street food. Grilled meat sizzled on a vendor's cart down the block, sending plumes of fragrant smoke into the humid air. Something sweet and fried wafted from somewhere else—maybe the dessert stall on the corner, the one Tui had taken me to during one of my first visits to the neighborhood.

Normal life. Happening all around me.

People who didn't know my name. Who didn't know about the voicemails or the vomiting or the way I'd kissed a man who couldn't love me back. They just moved through their days, focused on their own concerns, their own dramas, their own small and large catastrophes.

It was strangely comforting.

I walked a few paces away from the studio entrance, past the neon sign that glowed even in daylight, past the window display of Hong's designs and Tui's portfolio pieces. My feet carried me automatically, following some internal compass that knew where I needed to go.

I found a trash can.

Public, metal, slightly overflowing with the refuse of urban life. Not dignified. Not ceremonial. Just a trash can. The paper bag was still in my hand. I'd been carrying it all this time, clutching it like evidence of a crime I was trying to hide. The contents weighed almost nothing—just fabric, just clothes—but they felt impossibly heavy.

I looked at the bag for a long moment.

Then I dropped it inside.

Goodbye, denim jacket.

The one I'd bought secondhand from a vintage shop, carefully selected because it made my shoulders look broader, because it matched the specific shade of blue in my favorite jeans. I'd felt confident in that jacket. Attractive. Like someone worthy of attention. Now it was covered in vomit and memory, and I never wanted to see it again.

What an idiot I'd been.

Goodbye, dignity.

That was the hardest one to throw away, mostly because I wasn't sure I'd had any left to begin with.

I stood there for a moment, watching the city move.

The trash can sat between me and the street, a barrier of sorts. On one side, the discarded evidence of my breakdown. On the other, the endless flow of people and vehicles and life continuing regardless of my pain. People walked by, talking on phones—animated conversations in Thai, in English, in languages I didn't recognize. Some laughed. Some argued. Some spoke in the low, intimate tones of lovers sharing secrets. Others ate street food—grilled skewers and sticky rice and cups of cut fruit doused in chili salt. They chewed and walked simultaneously, multitasking their way through the afternoon, nourishing their bodies while their minds focused on wherever they were going next.

Everyone living lives that didn't involve vomiting on ex-lovers' carpets.

Everyone moving forward while I stood still.

Stay away from him, Hong had said.

It was good advice. Sensible advice. The kind of thing a rational person would hear and immediately follow, nodding sagely about boundaries and self-preservation and the importance of knowing when to walk away.

I wanted to do it. I wanted so desperately to forget the pain—the weight in my chest that had taken up permanent residence, pressing down on my lungs every time I breathed. I wanted to stop thinking about William's face, about his voice, about the way his lips had felt against mine in that terrible, beautiful moment before everything fell apart. I wanted to be free.

But I knew myself and with all that—with everything that had happened, with all the guilt burning inside me like acid—I still hoped for something from William.

Pathetic, I thought, the word sharp and familiar. You're absolutely pathetic.

I kept waiting.

That was the worst part. Despite the rejection, despite the manager's message, despite the clear and obvious evidence that William did not want me in his life—I was still waiting. For what? A text he'd never send? An apology he'd never offer? Some grand romantic gesture where he appeared at my door, having finally overcome his fears, ready to love me the way I desperately wanted to be loved?

Fairy tales, I thought bitterly. You're living in fairy tales.

I kept longing for something from him. Anything. A sign. A word. Even anger would have been better than this silence, this void where communication used to exist. At least anger meant he was still thinking about me. At least anger meant I'd mattered enough to provoke an emotion. But there was nothing.

Just the manager's message, cold and professional, delivered like a corporate memo closing out a failed account.

And the distance hurt even more because of how it had happened. From the same nothingness from which I'd met William, a distance had emerged. One day we were kissing in his apartment, and he was painting my portrait, and I was falling so hard I couldn't see the ground rushing up to meet me. The next day—silence. Withdrawal. A door slamming in my face.

No explanation. No closure.

Just nothing, sudden and total, like someone had flipped a switch and turned off whatever had been building between us. And only I was paying the consequences.

William got to hide in his tower. William got to have his manager handle the messy human emotions he couldn't be bothered to face. William got to be protected, sheltered, excused because of his mental health and his history and his precious artistic sensitivity.

Meanwhile, I was standing next to a trash can in the middle of Bangkok, trying to figure out how to exist without the hope I'd built my recent life around.

I looked at the trash can one last time.

My jacket was in there somewhere, buried under fast-food wrappers and empty bottles and whatever other garbage the city had produced today. The physical evidence of my breakdown, discarded among the detritus of ordinary life.

If only I could throw away the emotional evidence just as easily. If only I could reach into my chest, pull out the tangled mess of feelings that refused to let go, and drop them into the trash alongside my ruined clothes.

But it didn't work that way.

The heart doesn't take orders from the brain. It just keeps feeling, keeps hoping,

keeps reaching toward the thing it wants even when that thing has made it abundantly clear that it wants nothing in return.

I took a breath.

Then another.

The air tasted like exhaust and fried food and the particular humidity of a tropical afternoon. Not pleasant, exactly, but real. Grounding. I was still here. Still standing. Still breathing.

That had to count for something.

I turned and walked back to the tattoo studio.

Inside, the atmosphere had shifted. The afternoon light filtered through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor. The music had changed—something softer now, more ambient, the kind of playlist that signaled the end of the workday rather than its middle.

Hong was arranging some t-shirts on a clothes rack near the front—his designs, I realized. His movements were methodical, careful, each shirt placed with deliberate attention to spacing and presentation. Even in simple tasks, Hong approached things like an artist.

Tui was talking to a man by the counter. A client, from the look of it—fresh bandage on his forearm, that slightly dazed expression that came from hours of needlework and the endorphin rush that followed. The man was gesturing at the tattoo, probably asking questions about aftercare or healing or when he could show it off to his friends.

Yuki emerged from the back room, peeling off her gloves with the satisfied air of someone who'd just completed a masterpiece. She looked proud of her work—a quiet, contained pride that didn't need to be announced but was visible in the set of her shoulders, the slight upturn of her mouth. The man at the counter talked a little more, nodding along to whatever Tui was explaining. Then he turned to the merchandise display and browsed for a moment before selecting a couple of items—an aftercare kit, one of Hong's shirts. He paid with his phone, gathered his purchases, and left with a wave and a promise to post photos once the tattoo healed.

The bell chimed as he departed.

Yuki gathered her bag, checked her phone, and headed for the door.

"I'm meeting some friends," she announced, her accented Thai warm with anticipation. "Shopping in the afternoon"

Tui shook his head. "Don't get lost. It's a maze in there."

"I have GPS! And friends!" She smiled—warm and genuine, the expression transforming her usually serious face into something almost playful. "See you Monday?"

"Monday." Tui confirmed.

She disappeared into the street, the bell chiming again in her wake.

I watched her go, surprised despite myself. She was much more sociable than I'd expected for someone who specialized in traditional Japanese tattooing—a discipline that seemed to demand solitude and focus above all else. But then again, people were always more complicated than their surfaces suggested. Everyone contained multitudes. Everyone had dimensions you didn't see until you looked closer.

Even me, apparently. Even now.

I helped them close up.

On weekends, the studio only accepted people with appointments. Walk-ins were a weekday luxury, when the traffic of curious passersby could be converted into spontaneous decisions and impulsive ink. Saturdays and Sundays were for scheduled work only—and once that work was done, the day ended early.

So it was just a matter of tidying up, securing the equipment, and locking the doors.

I swept the floor while Hong finished with the merchandise. The broom moved in familiar patterns, back and forth, gathering dust and stray threads and the occasional lost bandage wrapper. Simple work. Meditative work. The kind of labor that occupied your hands while leaving your mind free to wander.

I tried not to let it wander too far.

Tui counted the register and made notes about supplies they needed to order—more aftercare kits, more of the specific ink brands Yuki preferred, more gloves in Hong's size. His handwriting was messier than I expected for an artist, the letters cramped and hurried like he was always racing against time.

Hong locked the back room and turned off the lights. Checked the windows. Made sure everything was secure.

We moved around each other with the ease of practice, even though I'd only been helping for a few days. There was a rhythm to it, a pattern that felt right. Like I belonged here, at least for now.

When everything was done, Tui flipped the sign to "Closed" and locked the front door.

"Upstairs?" he asked.

"Upstairs." Hong agreed.

We went up together. Tui's apartment welcomed us with its familiar warmth—the worn couch that had seen a thousand late nights, the corkboard covered in sketches and reference photos, the smell of sandalwood that never quite faded no matter how long the windows stayed open.

Hong threw himself onto the sofa with a dramatic sigh, his silver hair fanning out against the cushions like a small explosion. He looked exhausted in that particular way that creative work produced—physically fine, but mentally drained from hours of focus and precision.

His phone was already in his hand before he'd even fully settled.

"Long day?" Tui asked, settling into the armchair across from him.

Hong just held up his phone in response, showing the screen without actually explaining what was on it. From my angle, I could see a cascade of text messages—a conversation that had been going for a while, judging by the scroll bar.

"Nut?" Tui guessed, a knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Hong nodded, his expression somewhere between exasperated and amused.

"You should accept a date once and for all," Tui said, leaning back in his chair. "The guy's been chasing you for months. At some point, you have to either put him out of his misery or give him a chance."

Hong responded by gently kicking him from the sofa, his sock-clad foot connecting with Tui's shin in a series of light, rhythmic taps. Not hard enough to hurt—just enough to be annoying.

"You should ask for a date," Hong countered, his voice deceptively mild.

Tui's eyebrows rose. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means." Hong's kicks continued, playful and persistent. The same rhythm, the same gentle pressure. "Don't act innocent."

There was something under the words—something I didn't quite understand, some shared knowledge between them that I wasn't privy to. Tui's expression flickered, a shadow of something complicated crossing his features before he schooled it back into neutrality.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tui said, but his voice was lighter now, deflecting.

"Sure you don't." Hong's kicking finally stopped. He let his leg drop back to the cushion with a sigh. "Now feed me, you animal. I've been working all day and I'm starving."

Tui laughed—a real, genuine sound that filled the apartment and chased away whatever tension had been building.

I watched them from the doorway.

The easy banter. The comfortable physicality. The way they pushed back against each other without any real heat, their words carrying the weight of long familiarity.

God, is this what it feels like to have siblings?

I was an only child. I'd never known.

My house had been quiet growing up—just me and my parents, the silence broken only by meals and homework and the occasional forced conversation about school or the future or the importance of making something of myself. We'd been polite to each other, mostly. Civil. But never... this. Never this easy warmth. Never this casual intimacy that didn't need to be earned or maintained, that just existed between people who'd known each other long enough to take the relationship for granted.

And then, after they kicked me out—after my father discovered who I really was and decided that who I really was wasn't acceptable—there had been nothing at all. No siblings to call. No extended family willing to take my side. Just silence, stretching out in every direction like a desert I had to cross alone.

I'd built my own family since then.

Tui, mostly. He'd been there from the beginning, from the scholarship days when we were both struggling to make ends meet, from the late nights editing photos and dreaming about the futures we might have if we worked hard enough.

A few friends who came and went—people who cared about me in spite of myself, who stuck around for a while before drifting away to their own lives, their own concerns.

But I'd never had this.

This casual domesticity. This sense of belonging that didn't require constant effort, constant proof of worthiness. This simple reality of people who wanted to be in the same space, doing nothing in particular, just existing together.

Hong noticed me watching and raised an eyebrow. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I shook off the melancholy and moved to sit on the floor near the couch, my back against the worn cushions. "Just thinking."



"Dangerous," Hong said, his tone dry. "You should stop that. Thinking leads to feelings, and feelings lead to... well." He gestured vaguely at me. "This."

"Thanks for the support."

"Anytime."

Tui was already heading to the kitchen, probably to figure out lunch. The sounds of cabinets opening and pots clanging drifted out—the familiar symphony of someone preparing a meal.

"I could order something," I offered, raising my voice so he could hear. "Save you the trouble."

"You ordered last night," Tui called back. "And the night before. My turn."

"You've been feeding me for three days straight. At some point this becomes charity."

"And I'll feed you for three more if you need it." His head appeared around the kitchen doorway, his expression mock-serious. "That's how this works, Est. You fall apart, I put you back together. Then next time I fall apart, you do the same for me."

"When have you ever fallen apart?"

"Ask me again in ten years." He grinned and disappeared back into the kitchen. "For now, just accept the help."

I leaned my head back against the couch cushion, staring at the ceiling.

The familiar water stain was there—the one shaped vaguely like a rabbit, if you squinted. I'd spent enough time on Tui's couch to know that ceiling intimately, every crack and discoloration memorized from hours of sleepless contemplation. Hong was scrolling through his phone beside me, his fingers moving in that particular rhythm that meant he was texting someone. Nut, probably—continuing whatever conversation had been happening earlier. Or maybe Lego, checking in after yesterday's revelation.

Lego came here looking like he's been through a war. The words echoed in my mind, persistent and troubling. I wanted to ask about it. Wanted to know what had happened, whether it had anything to do with William, whether I'd somehow made things worse by dragging everyone into my disaster. But it wasn't my story to demand. And right now, I had enough of my own mess to sort through without borrowing someone else's.

The smell of cooking started to drift from the kitchen—something savory, something with garlic and ginger and the particular aroma of a stir-fry coming together. My stomach growled, reminding me that I'd barely eaten today, that the muffin from

this morning wasn't going to sustain me through whatever came next.

"Thank you." I said quietly, not sure who I was talking to.

Hong looked up from his phone. "For what?"

"For earlier. The truth. Even when it was harsh."

He studied me for a moment, that unreadable expression settling over his features like a mask. "You needed to hear it," he said finally. "Someone had to say it."

"I know." I smiled weakly—a fragile, uncertain thing. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Fair enough."

We sat in comfortable silence after that, letting the apartment hold us in its warmth. Outside, the city continued its endless movement.

Afternoon.

We ate lunch together with Hong.

The meal was simple—something Tui had thrown together from whatever was in his kitchen, which turned out to be surprisingly good. Stir-fried vegetables with rice, a few pieces of chicken that had been marinating in something garlicky, and the kind of comfort that only home-cooked food could provide.

I missed this.

Not just the food, though that was certainly part of it. I missed the companionship. The easy conversation that flowed between bites. The way Hong made dry observations that made me snort into my rice, and the way Tui rolled his eyes but couldn't hide his smile.

I'd been so focused on William for weeks now. Months, maybe. Every spare thought devoted to analyzing his texts, interpreting his silences, wondering what I could do differently to make him want me the way I wanted him.

And look where that had gotten me.

Vomiting on carpets. Leaving desperate voicemails. Standing in hallways at 3 AM, crying to anyone who would listen.

Working so hard to avoid thinking about William had been a terrible idea—mostly because I hadn't actually avoided thinking about him at all. I'd just redirected all my energy into chasing him, which was infinitely worse than simply sitting with the feelings and letting them pass.

Now, sitting here with a plate of food and two people who actually seemed to care

about my well-being, I felt something shift inside me.

I had to get my life back on track.

Not just romantically—though that was certainly a disaster area that needed attention—but in every way. My work. My friendships. My relationship with myself. I needed to give time and affection to those who truly deserved it. The people who showed up. The people who answered their phones. The people who made me lunch when I was falling apart and didn't ask for anything in return except maybe company and the occasional dishwashing assistance.

And this time, I really wanted to take the first step.

The idea of going to therapy—the suggestion Nut had made at the office, the one Hong had echoed earlier—sounded more and more like my future. Not a last resort or a sign of failure, but an actual, practical tool for figuring out why I kept making the same mistakes.

Why I kept choosing storms over solid ground.

Maybe a professional could help me understand that. Maybe they could give me frameworks, strategies, ways of seeing myself that didn't end in self-destruction.

It was worth trying, at least.

We finished eating and cleared the plates.

Hong offered to wash the dishes—a surprising gesture from someone who usually projected an air of effortless detachment—and Tui accepted with a grateful nod. I dried while Hong washed, the rhythm of the work easy and meditative.

The glasses gleamed in Tui's kitchen by the time we were done, catching the afternoon light and throwing little rainbows across the counter.

"You're actually useful." I said to Hong, impressed.

"Don't sound so surprised." he replied, drying his hands on the dish towel. "I live with my sister and a four-year-old. If I didn't learn to clean up after myself, I'd be homeless."

"Fair point."

By 4:40 in the afternoon, Hong was ready to leave.

"They came for me." he announced, grabbing his backpack from where it sat at the foot of the sofa. The bag was covered in pins and patches—some artistic, some ironic, all arranged with the particular chaos that somehow looked intentional.

He shouldered it easily and turned to Tui, his expression shifting into something that

might have been teasing if it weren't so deadpan.

"At least say goodbye to me at your front door, you brat."

Tui grumbled something unintelligible but rose from the armchair, his movements reluctant in that exaggerated way that meant he was actually happy to comply but didn't want to admit it.

Hong turned to me next, and his face changed completely—softening into something warmer, more genuine.

"See you later," he said. "Take care of yourself. And I mean that. Actually take care of yourself, not whatever you've been doing for the past few weeks."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime." He smiled—a real smile, the kind that crinkled the corners of his eyes and made him look younger than his twenty-two years. "We'll talk soon, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I followed them to the door.

Outside on the street was Lego.

I saw him before I fully registered who he was—a slight figure standing on the sidewalk, bathed in the golden light of late afternoon. He was wearing a black sweatshirt with pink bows on the sleeves, the kind of detail that seemed almost too cute for someone who wasn't deliberately cultivating an aesthetic. His shorts were simple, practical, ending above the knee to reveal legs that looked too thin for someone his age.

On his shoulder hung a cloth bag with drawings of a character I didn't recognize—drawings of a cartoon character I didn't recognize—something Japanese and round.

And now that I could see him more closely—now that I wasn't just catching glimpses through windows or hearing about him secondhand—I could see that he was clearly younger than I'd expected.

Hong was twenty-two years old. If they studied at the same university. Lego must be almost the same age. Nineteen, maybe? Twenty? He looked soft. Approachable, standing there in the afternoon light, with his too-big sweatshirt and his uncertain posture, he looked like a teenager. Someone who should be worrying about exams and parties and first crushes, not... whatever it was that had made him come to the studio "looking like he'd been through a war."

I remembered Hong's words from earlier, and something in my chest tightened.

What happened to you? I wanted to ask.

But those weren't my questions to ask. Not here, not now.

I could see Tui's eyes light up when he saw Lego.

It was subtle—Tui was good at controlling his expressions, at projecting calm even when he felt something else—but I'd known him for years. I knew what he looked like when he was interested in someone. I knew the way his whole body oriented toward that person, the way his attention sharpened, the way his voice softened.

All of that was happening now.

And I knew, with sudden clarity, that Hong's jokes earlier—You should ask for a date—had been directed at exactly this.

Clearly, Tui saw Lego with different eyes than a brother.

Completely different from how he saw Hong, with their easy sibling-like banter and comfortable physicality. And different from how he saw me, with our years of friendship and mutual support and the particular intimacy of people who'd helped each other through dark times.

This was something else entirely.

This was Tui looking at someone and wanting.

I filed that information away for later, simultaneously pleased that I'd figured it out and worried about what it meant for everyone involved.

Hong came down the stairs with a grin on his face.

He moved with that particular energy of someone who was genuinely happy to see another person—not the performative enthusiasm I'd seen from him in professional settings, but something real and warm and almost childlike.

He waved euphorically, his whole arm getting into the motion, and Lego responded with a smile that transformed his entire face.

"Shorty!" he called out.

For a moment, I forgot about the war metaphor Hong had used. For a moment, Lego just looked like a kid who was happy to see his friend.

They fell into a big hug on the sidewalk—the kind of embrace that involved full body contact, arms wrapped tight, heads tucked against shoulders. Hong was taller, so Lego's face disappeared somewhere into his chest.

And then Hong lifted him off the ground.

It was casual, effortless—the motion of someone who'd done this a hundred times

before and thought nothing of it. Lego's feet left the pavement, and for a second he was suspended in Hong's arms, held up like something precious.

"P'Hong!" Lego shouted, his voice sharp with mock-indignation. "Put me down!"

Hong just laughed and spun him slightly before setting him back on the ground.

"You're light as a feather," Hong said, sounding pleased with himself. "You need to eat more."

"I eat plenty."

"Lies. I've seen your fridge."

They continued bickering as they separated, but there was no heat in it—just the comfortable rhythm of people who knew each other well enough to tease without causing harm.

Then, to my surprise, Lego looked up.

His eyes traveled past Hong, past the stairs, and found us standing in the doorway—Tui and me, watching the reunion like spectators at a play.

He waved shyly.

It was such a small gesture. Just a hand raised, fingers wiggling slightly, the motion hesitant in a way that suggested he wasn't sure he had the right to acknowledge us.

I waved back. Tui did too, though his wave was slower, more deliberate, his eyes never leaving Lego's face.

"I'm leaving," Hong announced, seemingly oblivious to the charged moment happening behind him. "See you Monday!"

He turned and started walking, his stride confident and easy. Lego followed behind him, falling into step with the natural ease of someone who'd walked beside this person many times before. I watched them go—two figures growing smaller as they moved down the street, eventually turning a corner and disappearing from view.

The sidewalk felt emptier without them.

And then it was just Tui and me.

Standing in the doorway of his apartment, the afternoon light painting everything gold. The street was quiet now, the earlier bustle of closing time having faded into the gentler rhythms of evening approaching.

I turned to look at Tui. He was still staring at the corner where Lego had disappeared, his expression unguarded in a way I rarely saw from him. There was

longing there—unmistakable, undeniable—and something that looked almost like fear.

Our eyes met.

I felt a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. A knowing smile. The kind of smile that said I see you and I know what you're feeling and we're going to talk about this whether you want to or not.

"Don't even say it." Tui warned, his voice a low growl.

My smile widened. "I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was just standing here. Minding my own business. Enjoying the nice weather."

"Bullshit."

I couldn't hold it in anymore. The laugh escaped me—a real, genuine sound that came from somewhere deep in my chest, somewhere that hadn't made that noise in days. It felt good. It felt incredible, actually, to laugh about something that wasn't painful. To find humor in Tui's obvious discomfort, in the way he was practically squirming under my gaze, in the absurdity of him—steady, reliable Tui—having a crush so obvious that even I could see it.

"You have it bad." I said, still laughing.

"Shut up."

"You should see your face right now. You look like a cartoon character who just got hit with a love arrow."

"I'm going back inside." Tui turned on his heel, retreating into the apartment with the deliberate speed of someone fleeing an uncomfortable conversation.

I followed him, still laughing, my footsteps echoing on the stairs.

"So when are you asking him out?" I called after him.

"Never. Drop it."

"That's not what Hong said—"

"Hong needs to mind his own business."

"Hong said you should ask for a date. Those were his exact words."

Tui stopped at the top of the stairs, turning to face me with an expression that was trying very hard to be stern and failing miserably.

"Est," he said, enunciating each word carefully. "I love you like a brother. But if you don't stop talking about this right now, I will throw you out of my apartment and you can sleep on the street."

"No you won't."

"Try me."

I reached the top of the stairs and stood beside him, our shoulders almost touching. The laughter had faded, but the warmth remained—that particular glow of connection, of understanding, of knowing someone well enough to push their buttons.

"He's cute." I said, softer now. "And he obviously likes you. What's the holdup?"

Tui sighed. It was a heavy sound—the exhale of someone carrying more than they wanted to admit.

"He's nineteen," Tui said quietly. "He's still in university. He's dealing with... a lot. And I'm..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I'm not what he needs right now."

"How do you know what he needs?"

"I don't. That's the point." Tui ran a hand through his hair, the motion agitated. "I've seen what happens when people rush into things. When they don't take time to figure out what they actually want. It ends badly. Someone always gets hurt."

"And you think that someone would be him?"

"I think it could be both of us." He looked at me, his expression raw in a way I rarely saw. "I'm not going to be another person who hurts him, Est. He's had enough of that."

He's had enough of that.

The words landed with weight, connecting to what Hong had said earlier. Lego came here looking like he'd been through a war.

"What happened to him?" I asked quietly. "With William, I mean. Hong said—"

"I don't know the details." Tui cut me off, but not unkindly. "Lego hasn't told me everything. But something happened. And whatever it was, it's not my story to share."

I nodded slowly. "I get that."

"Good." Tui moved toward the kitchen, clearly ready to change the subject. "Now, are you staying for dinner or are you finally going back to your own apartment?"



I thought about my apartment. The empty refrigerator. The memories lurking in every corner. The phone sitting on my nightstand, filled with evidence of my breakdown.

"I should probably go home." I said. "Start... I don't know. Putting my life back together."

"You sure?"

"No." I smiled weakly. "But I have to start sometime."

Tui nodded. "Call me if you need anything. And I mean anything. Even if it's 3 AM. Even if you just want someone to talk to."

"I know."

"And Est?"

I paused at the door, looking back.

"The therapy thing," Tui said. "Look into it. For real. You deserve to have someone in your corner who isn't... us. Someone objective."

"I will." I said. And for the first time, I actually meant it.

The walk to the bus stop felt different.

Lighter, somehow. Despite everything that had happened—despite the breakdown and the voicemails and the vomiting and the mortifying memory of kissing William in his doorway—I felt something that might have been hope. Not hope for William. That ship had sailed, crashed into rocks, and sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

But hope for myself. Hope that I could learn. That I could grow. That I could become someone who chose better, who loved smarter, who didn't need to destroy himself chasing people who couldn't love him back. The bus came. I got on. Bangkok scrolled past the window as we moved through the evening traffic.

And for the first time in weeks, I didn't check my phone to see if William had texted.

It was progress. Small, fragile, uncertain progress. But progress nonetheless.